"THE LAND OF NOD" ON A PLANTATION.

By Octave Thanet.

How many years ago was it that the "Land of Nod" appeared in St. Nicholas? My volume is not at hand (in fact, it has been literally worn out in the service); but, last spring, I could repeat most of the songs by heart. You see we used the play for our school exhibition in the little white school-house by the cypress brake. And a great success it was, too. Some of the thousands of St. Nicholas readers who have laughed over the droll little operetta may like to know how it fared far away from stages, costumes, or even a dry-goods store.

Our plantation is on a little river six miles (and a swamp) from the railway. The black old mill grinds corn, saws lumber, and gins cotton for us, because we are a cotton plantation; and the big white store sells all the dresses, hats, and coats for the "renters" and the farmers scattered through country across the river,—all the groceries, also, and the medicines, stoves, meat, and farming implements.

Whatever else we may need, we must order through the mail-rider who comes every day to the post-office in the store.

The Carrolls' house overlooks the devious willow-shaded river; but the Planter's house (the planter is Mrs. Carroll's partner) is farther back.

Half-a-mile away is the school-house, where all the little white children go to school. In the spring, the grassy ways about the school-house are speckled with "bluets" and white "spring beauties," and countless violets. In the cypress "slash," behind the house, tall cypress-trees show a sprinkling of dainty green, fine as fern-fronds, mingling with the star-shaped foliage of the tupello gum and the beautiful hackberry leaves — all these delicate forms are in strange contrast to the huddle of "cypress knees" below or the hideous trunks of the hackberry. Cow-lilies, yellow as gold, spatter the black water, which is like a line of ink drawn through roots and "knees."

When spring comes, school closes. It is time for the children to help "make a crop."

So it was in April that we gave "The Land of Nod."

The school-teacher suggested it — not the regular school-teacher. A regular school-teacher would have thought it far too much trouble, and, recoiling before the thought of costumes, have substituted a "dialogue"; but Ethel, who took the school because she happened to be visiting her aunt, Mrs. Carroll, knew little about trouble, and proposed it hopefully.

Dora, one of that class who look before they leap, glanced over the pages.

"There appear to be many costumes required," she observed without enthusiasm.

"Well, but, my dear," Mrs. Carroll replied quickly,— Mrs. Carroll has that divine quality, hope,— "there is pretty, light-colored silesia at the store, and we have silver-paper."

Dora's eyes ran down the *dramatis personæ*, as she answered: "One, two — *four* royal personages. You can't dress kings and queens in silesia."

"Oh, yes, you can," said her mother, cheerfully, "by lamplight. It will be at night."

Ethel was delighted. She offered to make the sword and armor for the standard-bearer; but we abandoned the standard and Mr. Planter borrowed a spear instead, from a "Wheel" society; a large, bright, tin spear that was a comfort to us, as the only solidly built article in our paraphernalia, and in consequence the only thing which could be handled with impunity.

Our first qualms about costumes soon vanished. Mrs. Planter was captured by Mrs. Carroll, who, though a gentle creature, sweeps discouragement before her like dust before a broom. Dora herself felt the contagion. Daily she went up to the school-house to drill the young actors. And even the humble person who writes this chronicle, and who has no gifts in costuming, was moved to offer an idea on decoration. She made gold and silver lace for the high-born personages of the drama. Gold and silver paint and common cotton lace were all she needed. Mrs. Planter is a lady of wide resources; but none can be named in the same breath with Mrs. Carroll. She can copy a picture in cloth; and beyond my praise is the manner in which she adapted, and, as it were, *enchanted*, our common hats and gowns and house-furnishings. She made wigs of horse-hair dyed blonde with curry powder; provided wings for the sprites, lovely ethereal wings of tarlatan and wire taste; shimmering, too, because sprinkled, regardless of expense, with diamond-dust; she turned

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a red piano-cover into the royal robe; she inked bands of cotton judiciously into a life-like similitude of ermine; she cut round pieces out of pasteboard, punched two holes in them, covered them with tin-foil, and, behold, dazzling silver buttons! — in fine, there was no end to her ingenuity.

Of course we had to make all the costumes. Shoes were the first difficulty. "Your pages," said Dora, "must wear *something* on their feet!"

"What do they usually have?" inquired the humble person.

"Boots," replied Ethel promptly; "boots with red tops and copper toes — or they go barefoot."

The humble person suggested our own low shoes; but, alas! the small actors' feet would not expand to fit them.

Ethel's bold idea was that the pages should act in stocking feet; shoes might be "simulated," she thought, with buckles and bows of ribbon, that would pass — by lamplight.

But Mrs. Carroll was shocked. "I should rather make the shoes myself!" cried she. "I believe I could, as well as not."

As good as her word, she cut them out of canton flannel matching the hose, and slashed them medievally with blue and pink. They were a triumph. And Ethel converted the tin horn from the store into a knightly trumpet, by ends of waving ribbon and a flaring rim of repoussé silver — otherwise, tin-foil. She, also, was the architect of the helmet, built of pasteboard and tin-foil until it glittered from afar, and (except for being a trifle large and slipping down over the unfortunate child's eyes) was everything that could be reasonably desired.

The Standard-bearer wore a coat-of-mail over a green jerkin. Coats-of-mail are best wrought out of sleeveless under-vests, silvered over with close-lapping scales of tin-foil (*sewed* on). The effect is startling.

Where we least expected trouble, it came. The six little Sleepy-heads were to wear nightgowns, but it appeared that long white nightgowns were articles of luxury on the plantation, and not all the children had them. Luckily, one kind little girl owned many, and lent to her companions, so that difficulty was conquered.

One regular costume only did we have on hand, and this one we gave to the Dream Prince. It was our pride,— a suit of brown velveteen, coat, waistcoat, and small-clothes complete, trimmed with store gold-braid,— a centennial costume, to be sure, but why need one be particular about imprisoning the *dramatis personæ* in one epoch?

Neither were we slavish in our following of the fashion of the time. The Prince should have worn a cocked hat; not having one, he wore a Henry VIII. cap and a paper feather, which really did quite as well.

Ethel had all the responsibility of the cast.

Not knowing which children could act, parts were distributed according to good behavior and good looks. The King of the Land of Nod was the best boy in school, who lives with his grandfather and does a man's work in the cotton-field; the Dream Prince received promotion on account of his beautiful dark eyes; Old Mother Goose was so kind to the children; My Lady Fortune's clean, white aprons singled her out; while both the Queen of the Dollies and the Dream Princess had always neatly brushed their hair; Jack o' Dreams turned out a bright young actor, but was appointed solely because of good temper; the Goblins were young Arkansans of French descent, whose black eyes and olive skins made them look their parts; the Sand Man was helping his father plow, and had a small part, since he could not be at rehearsals; all the Sprites were nice little girls who learned their lessons and kept their faces clean; the Standard-bearer was chosen in recognition of his fortitude when he fell off the tree (which he climbed to get Ethel some mistletoe) and sprained his ankle; he carried the noble tin spear and wore the shining helmet; as for the Sleepy-heads, they were chosen as being just little, chubby, and pretty, and the Pages had good looks rather than good behavior to thank; but then, since fairy tales began, pages have been mischievous.

Page Edgar was (in Arkansas phrase) "chilling," while Page Sebastian had a chronic cold in the head. But chills and colds are both common in the Arkansas river bottoms. If one lives in a "balloon frame" house, with only one thickness of wood between winter and the family, or in a house of hewn logs, feebly plastered with mud, he is very likely to catch cold by spring; while we who have never had chills, too often ascribe the malaria as much to the Arkansas fondness for pork and strong coffee three times a day, as to the climate.

However, be the fault where it may, it is certain that last spring there was hardly a day at the school-house that two or three of the scholars were not laid out on the benches. If one were to ask them what was the matter they would answer quietly, as though it were quite a matter of course, "Jes' chillin'."

They had probably walked from one to four miles that morning, to school; they would have to walk back again, but they never thought of not coming. When the chill ceased they would get up and go back to their books. "I never saw such patient children," Ethel often said.

Rehearsals were sometimes interrupted by chills, but more often by "wash-days" or the crops.

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Some days the school-room looked dismally empty, because the girls were home at housekeeping work, and the boys were busy on the farm.

I will not detail all our small disasters. Somehow, we persevered, in spite of everything. The plantation carpenter built the platform, and laid boards across between benches, for additional seats. The lamp chimneys were cleaned, and we thought of cleaning even the windows, but gave it up as being a life-work; besides, as Mrs. Carroll truly said, they never would show at night.

In spite of the carpenter, the platform was too small; but we drilled the Sprites to dance chiefly up and down in the same place; and since the wide circles of a wheelbarrow were quite out of the question, the Sand Man and the Jack o' Dreams carried the Sleepy-heads upon the stage.

We rigged a calico curtain with two ropes, and (if you were careful and did not pull the wrong rope and pulled the right one hard enough) it worked quite as well as most unprofessional curtains.

The appointed evening came at last. There was a great outpouring of all the families of the renters and farmers round about.

Families came together,— father, mother, and children, down to the patient Arkansas baby in its red flannel gown. They arrived on foot, in wagons, in mud-splashed buggies, on horseback and mule-back, with saddles or without. They crowded the school-room, and rows of black faces were flattened against the window-panes outside.

Meanwhile, we were dressing the performers. The "Land of Nod" was only the climax of the exhibition. Speeches and readings were all to be heard beforehand. It must be confessed that we were in a great hubbub, only one room being available for dressing. It was the room where the children hung their hats and coats, the boys on the right-hand row of nails, the girls on the left. But with screens and curtains we made two dressing-rooms.

Perhaps we should have been more speedy "dressers" if we had not needed to do so much pinning. It was a tragic interval when the paper of pins was lost, and everything came to a dead halt! However, every one was dressed before the good-natured audience had finished their talk about the speaking.

The procession was imposing. The King of the Land of Nod looked truly regal in our piano-cover, his black doublet blazing with gold paper moons and stars, and gold lace from raisin-boxes; Ethel's laces, at his throat and wrists, and a pair of Dora's black silk stockings darkly gleaming below, Rhine-stone shoe-buckles, one of the most elaborate pasteboard crowns ever made, bedecked with red paper poppies, encircling his beautiful gray horse-hair curls and a brass curtain-rod scepter in his carefully washed hand. The Pages were pretty little fellows, and if, like the Marchioness, you "pretended" very hard, their doublets and trunk-hose of gray silesia slashed with pink and blue looked very like silk. The Queen of the Dollies wore a flowered cretonne gown richly embroidered with gold paint. Her raiment, I believe, started in life as a lounge cover. The Dream Princess looked charming in an ex-window-curtain. The Sprites, or Fairies, were visions of white tarlatan, crimped hair, powder, and spangled wings. Lady Fortune wore a Greek dress. Snowy folds of cheese-cloth draped her with classic grace. Gold fillets bound her dark hair; and no one who did not know it would ever suspect that the blue Grecian pattern adorning the hem of her gown was made of paper. She had a wheel-of-fortune fine enough to make a paid supernumerary jealous. Altogether, she was an object of pride.

The Jack o' Dreams was in a clown's dress of red and yellow. We sent to town for his bells. He capered about the stage with as much abandon as if space had no limits, instead of there being barely room to spin round.

As the curtain rose majestically, with only two hitches, to the strains of the mice-eaten organ, and the procession filed on the stage, there was a loud murmur of applause. The overworked mothers, who had risen before daylight to get scrubbing and cooking out of the way and the family into their Sunday best and everybody safely packed on the mules, and "the old man" persuaded to come and see "Bud" and "Sis" in their "pretty clothes," all smiled at each other with a sense of pleasurable excitement.

The King's grandfather sat in front. It was to be the King's last year in school, which seemed a great pity to us all, but the grandfather needed him and did n't "'low he needed no more larnin', onyhow." We were surprised to see the old man. There he sat, however, his gnarled old face aglow in spite of himself over the King's magnificence. "Fine 's a circus, ain't it?" Dora overheard him mutter to the mother of the Standard-bearer.

Dora was at the organ, while Mrs. Planter was stage-manager, Ethel was prompter, the humble person had the task of keeping the Sleepy-heads in good humor, and Mrs. Carroll sat in her good clothes among the audience.

Occasionally her artist's anxiety sent in (by one of the children) such messages as: "Tie the small-clothes on, don't pin them. I know there is a pin sticking into the Jack o' Dreams!" "You must rub off the powder a little, it shows from the front!"

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"Melancthon Bates can't come, his sister says he 's chilling; you 'll have to get another Sleepy-head. I 'll find somebody." "You must *pin* on the shoes — Page Edgar has lost one of his, already." And so forth.

We fared prosperously until we began to carry the Sleepy-heads upon the stage. This was done by the Jack o' Dreams and the Sand Man. Three Sleepy-heads were laid carefully in the wrong position, while the audience laughed and cheered; then the Jack o' Dreams was observed to hold back, clutching at his garments — those fatal pins!

"Come on!" whispered Mrs. Planter from the right wing.

"*Go* on!" whispered Ethel from the left.

"I don't guess he *can*," apologized the Sand Man, in an audible aside.

"Have Miss Ethel pin you up, then," said Mrs. Planter. "Make haste!"

"Oh, hitch 'em up, Bud, an' go on!" called an impatient listener on the front seats.

Jack wisely followed this advice, and so got within easy reach of Mrs. Planter's arm, being instantly captured and pinned into shape again.

"I think I 've pinned through his very skin," was Mrs. Planter's calm remark; "but he 's a plucky boy, and he won't mind."

He did not mind. He jumped, and leaped, and grimaced, to the delight of the audience; he was the dramatic success of the evening. But nothing could be prettier than the Sprites' singing and dancing, unless it was the little Sleepy-heads' sweet little, high voices, and the way they sat up so drowsily when they were awaked. That is, all the girls sat up, but all the little boys lay still,— fast asleep in reality as well as in play.

In vain did the Sprites sing: "Wake! wake! the charm we break!" In vain did Mrs. Planter and Ethel and the humble person call in loud whispers which every one else in the house but the sleepers could hear: "Johnny! Freddy! Bertie! Wake *up!*" They were in much better company than the King of the Land of Nod or the Queen of the Dollies, and not even the loud applause of the kindly audience could bring them back.

So their fathers and mothers quietly bundled them home to their own little beds.

Then Mr. Planter made a speech,— wise, and kind, and funny,— which pleased everybody; the school prizes were announced, and there were so many of them that everybody grew more pleased, except the babies, who felt that it was high time to go home, and said so quite plainly and loudly, if not in so many words. By this time the moon was up, and the muddy places and fords could be seen, and the exhibition was ended.

Many were the compliments paid Ethel, with that natural courtesy that belongs to the very humblest Southerners; but none pleased her so much as the few words the King of the Land of Nod's grandfather spoke to her in passing, "Wal, Miss, that was a mighty good show. I b'lieve in boys larnin' to speak. I reckon I kin make out without my boy fur a spell nex' year, an' let him come to school. He keeps all my cotton accounts now,— that boy!"

THE SPRINT-RUNNER.

By Joel Stacy.

"Learning? Where 's the use of learning?"
Johnny cried, his lesson spurning.
"As for me, I 'd rather run!"
So from morn to set of sun,
Johnny's legs were never still;
He could distance Bob and Bill,
Jim and Tom, and Dick and Peter.
Not a youth in town was fleeter.

Grammar, Algebra, and History
Glimmered in a hazy mystery,
School terms softly sped away,
While he practiced day by day,—
Week by week, and through vacation.
Then his friends, in desperation,
Vowed the boy was not for knowledge;
So they sent him off to college.

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